

Critical Realism in Information Systems Research

Special Issue Guest Editors

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Submission Deadline: November 1, 2011

Rationale for the Special Issue

There has been growing interest (Ackroyd and Fleetwood 2000; Danermark et al. 2002; Fleetwood 1999; Fleetwood and Ackroyd 2004) in a range of disciplines in ideas derived from the philosophical tradition of critical realism (CR). This special issue seeks contributions that extend and develop this approach in information systems research. Critical realism offers exciting prospects in shifting attention toward the real problems that we face and their underlying causes, and away from a focus on data and methods of analysis. As such, it offers a robust framework for the use of a variety of methods in order to gain better purchase on the meaning and significance of information systems in the contemporary world.

Of course, there are debates about exactly how such purchase is to be obtained and the Guest Editors of this special issue seek to provide a forum for such debates. However, they start from the perspective of critical realism as developed from the foundational work of Roy Bhaskar in the philosophy of science, and later developed in the social arena by authors such as Archer and Sayer (Archer et al. 1998; Bhaskar 1978, 1979; Mingers 2004c; Sayer 2000). In this tradition, the benefits of CR are seen as

- CR defends a strongly realist ontology that there is an existing, causally efficacious, world independent of our knowledge. It defends this against both classical positivism that would reduce the world to that which can be empirically observed and measured, and the various forms of constructivism that would reduce the world to our human knowledge of it.
- CR recognizes that our access to this world is in fact limited and always mediated by our perceptual and theoretical lenses. It accepts *epistemic* relativity (that knowledge is always local and historical), but not thereby *judgmental* relativity (that all viewpoints must be equally valid).
- CR accepts the existence of different types of objects of knowledge—physical, social, and conceptual—that have different ontological and epistemological characteristics. They therefore require a range of different research methods and methodologies to access them. Since a particular object of research may well have different characteristics, it is likely that a mixed-method research strategy (i.e., a variety of methods in the same research study) will be necessary and CR supports this.

CR is seen as a philosophical “under-laborer” for substantive theories about the world, helping to gain conceptual clarity. It therefore follows that critical realism should be consistent with a number of theoretical approaches. For example, some have argued that structuration theory, an approach of considerable importance in IS research, can be compatible with CR (Mingers 2004a) while others argue strongly that this is not the case (Archer 1996; Stones 2005). Finding the ideas of critical realism helpful, therefore, does not rule out debate about how the ideas are to be applied and we seek to facilitate such debate. This can even extend to approaches that have often been labeled as “post-modernist” or “social constructivist.” For example, Harman (2009) has provided a powerful argument, based in part on Bhaskar, for actor–network theory to be taken as a realist endeavor. Critical realism thus facilitates connections with work being carried out in organization studies, sociology, and social theory, which shares related domains of inquiry.

We also recognize that critical realism itself has different meanings. While we are based in the Bhaskarian approach, we recognize the potential value in aligning this tradition with that represented by, for example, Campbell’s views of critical realism (Brewer and Collins 1981; Burton-Jones 2009; Cook and Campbell 1979). This raises important questions about how the methods we espouse can be related to the context of inquiry. In this context, CR provides a coherent and well-developed (Ackroyd and Fleetwood 2000; Danermark et al. 2002; Fleetwood 1999; Fleetwood and Ackroyd 2004) philosophical platform that accepts elements of both positivism and interpretivism (and other approaches to the extent that they do not deny CR’s principles) while recognizing the limitations of both. Crucially, it pushes us as researchers to go beyond the observation of particular facts or interpretations toward an understanding and explanation of *why* they occur and *what effects* they might have.

Call for Submissions

Critical realism has already begun to make headway within information systems with contributions at the level of philosophy (Dobson 2001; Klein 2004; Mingers 2004b, 2004d; Mingers and Walsham 2010; Mutch 1999, 2002) and theory (Bygstad 2008; Hevner et al. 2010; Longshore Smith 2006; Mutch 2010; Reimers and Johnson 2008), as well as empirical studies (Faulkner and Runde 2009; Volkoff, et al. 2007; Wynn and Williams 2008; Zachariadis and Scott 2007).

We invite papers that will help to establish the relevance and utility of critical realism as an underlying philosophy for information systems and information technology research. We do not seek narrowly philosophical papers, but ones that are critical and reflexive in their approach. We would particularly welcome papers that are practical in their contribution, either in terms of developing or explaining particular methodological approaches, or illustrating the contribution of CR with real empirical examples. Papers must refer to some aspect of the IS discipline, as exemplified in the traditions of this journal. Possible topics include, but are not limited to,

1. Practical application

- Empirical studies that are explicit in the ways that they are informed by critical realism.
- What value does CR add over well-produced qualitative or quantitative research?

2. Implications for research

- What are the defining characteristics of CR research (i.e., what must be the case for research to be labeled “critical realist”)?
- What are the ethical implications of CR for IS?
- What are the implications of the search for “causal mechanisms” that might be at play within the domain of ICT, and what methods would best access them?
- How does critical realism help with the selection of research methods and does it help deal with the supposed clash between quantitative and qualitative methods (Mingers 2001)?

3. Links to other theories

- Is CR compatible (or not) with newer research approaches and theories such as actor–network theory (Law 2004), feminist research (Haraway 1988), grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), or critical theory (Habermas 2003)?
- How might CR-informed research link to complementary work in organization studies, sociology, or social theory?

4. Philosophical foundations

- Does CR really overcome the paradigm incommensurability issue (i.e., that paradigms are so all pervasive that they cannot be compared with one another)?
- Is CR best seen as an alternative paradigm, or as a paradigm that subsumes the others?
- How does CR differ from other “post-positivist” paradigms?

Review Process and Deadlines

Submission for the Special Issue will be desk reviewed by the Guest Editors and only sent for full review if it is felt that they have a good chance of success after possible revisions subject to MISQ’s usual standards. All papers will be double-blind reviewed by Associate Editors. There will be only two rounds of reviewing; papers not accepted at that stage will be rejected. All final decisions will be made jointly by the Guest Editors.

Timetable

Paper submission	November 1, 2011
Initial desk	December 1, 2011
Round 1 review	March 1, 2012
Resubmissions	June 1, 2012
Round 2 review	September 1, 2012
Resubmissions	December 1, 2012
Final editorial	January 1, 2013

Early submissions are welcome and will be put into the review process straightaway.

All submissions for the Special Issue should comply with the formatting guidelines for MISQ and must be submitted electronically to <http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/misq>.

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